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UNCLAS COLOMBO 001020

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SUBJECT: Pro-JVP Media Minister Persuaded to Resign

1. (SBU) Summary: Aviation, Ports and Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera resigned from the media portfolio today amid speculation the President had asked him to do so due to his alleged favoritism towards the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna(JVP), the government's Marxist/Sinhala nationalist junior alliance partner. End summary.

2. (SBU) A long time confidant of the President and former national organizer of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Mangala Samaraweera returned to the Media Ministry when President Kumaratunga's alliance won re-election in April 2004. Although Samaraweera is an SLFP member, he sympathized with the JVP and, in fact, was instrumental in facilitating the alliance between the JVP and SLFP. He allegedly favored pro-JVP media, and spoke out against the proposed Joint Mechanism with the LTTE to the Sunday Lankadeepa (Sinhala sister paper to the mainstream independent Daily Mirror). In April, the President appointed Minister of Finance Sarath Amunagama to keep tabs on the Media Ministry and Samaraweera. Recently, the President tasked two current confidants, Harim Peiris, Director General of Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, and Eric Fernando, Director General of the Presidential Media Unit, to spearhead a campaign to educate the public about the virtues of the Joint Mechanism. According to a report in the Sunday Times, Peiris and Fernando, without informing Samaraweera, arranged to hold daily meetings with the President and Media Ministry Secretary W.B. Ganegala.

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3. (SBU) Comment. Speculation in media circles abounds that Samaraweera's resignation may be part of a larger cabinet reshuffle within the next few days as the President's final decision on the Joint Mechanism approaches. She may have viewed Samaraweera, allegedly biased towards the JVP, as a liability in her efforts to convince the public of the necessity of signing the accord. End Comment.
Lunstead